

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



# Creating a Pathway to Fragrance

There is something special about pathways. Some lead directly to the welcome mat of our homes, while others lead to secluded patios and gardens. Pathways can extend an invitation to friends and guests or lead us away on new adventures. Unfortunately, most of the paths we typically design are sterile ribbons of concrete. However, with some alternate paving materials and a nose for fragrant ground covers, we can transform those lifeless, static pathways into a welcome treat for the senses.

To begin, we should avoid the whole notion of paving itself. Instead of treating our path like a public sidewalk, with rigid lines and precise curves, we ought to realize that we are creating a walkway, a place for strolling or occasional foot traffic. We will not need steel-reinforced concrete here. A more desirable path ought to become an extension of the garden or landscape. To create a much more natural impression, the path can be constructed with multi-colored flat or rough-textured stepping stones, which will provide an air of rustic simplicity.

For heavily used paths, consider using mountain or Mojave flagstones, or bluestones, which are often available either tumbled or irregularly cut. Other options include granite cobblestones, precast cement pavers with open spaces at their cen-

ter, or even bricks, with the bricks laid in a somewhat open and meandering pattern. All of the materials should be arranged to allow for openings between the actual "stepping stones," into which we will plant a variety of foot-friendly and aromatic ground covers.

Between and around our stepping stones we can work some real horticultural magic. Forget about grass, gravel, and mulch! Our fragrant pathway will feature a living tapestry of herbs in shades of green, gold, white and silver, with a succession of

blooms from pink and red to lilac and dazzling white. Best of all, our path will provide a haunting tapestry of rich aromas, each of which will add yet another sensual dimension to the garden. With each step you will discover that these natural perfumes can stir warm memories, invigorate the senses, and soothe the soul.

One of the most readily available ground-hugging herbs is Corsican mint (*Mentha requienii*), a tough, fast-spreading favorite whose tiny peppermint-scented leaves form a dense mat less than one inch high.



Corsican mint can even send tiny shoots between the smallest cracks in a brick path, and will splash up against stepping stones like waves from a bright green sea. Corsican mint produces lilliputian white and purple flowers and reseeds rapidly each spring. You will almost have to stop yourself from rolling around on top of your walkway.

Another seductive ground cover is sometimes called lawn chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile* 'Trenegue'), a non-flowering species similar to Roman chamomile, the daisy-like flowering chamomile sometimes used in teas, as is the unrelated German or sweet false chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*). Lawn chamomile seldom grows much taller than two inches and its soft fern-like, apple-scented leaves welcome light foot traffic. In fact, in Britain it is sometimes used to create an entire lawn (25 plants per square yard), perhaps a useful suggestion for townhouse owners who want a lush and fragrant green yard without mowing. However, this perennial chamomile sometimes requires a bit of patching after a couple of years, and might best be kept within a pathway setting. The plants may also be started from seed.

Without question, the most versatile of fragrant herbs for walkways and alternative lawns is thyme. Thyme is ideal for hot, sunny locations, although it can tolerate some degree of shade. There are also scores of different varieties, with new selections added every year. Best of all, you can easily establish an ever-changing tapestry effect by planting

a dozen or more different varieties in your pathway or "thyme lawn" area, mixing them up, and allowing no more than about one foot between each plant. You will probably want to spend a little time planning your planting scheme to provide an even distribution of plants by foliar and flower color, avoiding keeping all of the silver-hued thymes in one area and the emerald greens in another. You should also be mindful of sequential blooming order. You do not want all of your flowers appearing in one part of the walkway in spring and another in the summer or fall. Select plants which will give you a wide range of blooming periods for year-round enjoyment.

Most garden centers will offer a couple different varieties of ground cover thymes, but for best effect you will probably need to visit a specialized herb nursery or consider the large number of Internet and mail-order sources. Herb sellers will easily offer dozens of different varieties for your garden, both as grown plants and seed packets.

Here are some suggestions, all of which are lavishly scented and grow between two and three inches in height: Aureus 'Creeping Golden' thyme, offering bright gold-colored foliage; caraway thyme, with dark green, caraway-scented leaves; creeping lime thyme, combines a bright chartreuse color with a citrus aroma reminiscent of margaritas in mid-summer; creeping red thyme, with deep reddish purple flowers in spring; creeping white moss thyme, with delicate white flowers, creeping woolly thyme, with soft, fuzzy foliage inviting to bare toes and fin-

ger tips; lemon frost thyme, offering glossy green leaves and tiny white flowers between May and June; mountain thyme, which offers deep reddish-violet flowers; pink ripple thyme, with light green, lemon-scented foliage and an abundant mass of salmon-pink flowers; and silver thyme, a classic creeping thyme with silver-green leaves and cream-colored margins.

As is the case with all gardening, you may find that some species are not as hardy as others, and some of your plantings may die after an especially cold winter. Do not look on these losses as failures so much as opportunities. Once you get the "thyme bug" you will probably find yourself scouting around for new varieties to add to your scented kaleidoscope, and will welcome an opportunity to squeeze in yet another addition.

Finally, you may want to consider defining the edge of your pathway to set it off from a lawn or other garden area. Keeping within the fragrant theme, you might enjoy developing a mixed border using English lavenders, particularly the 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead' varieties, which have compact growth habits, and hug the ground at about 12 inches. Also, employ some of the larger mounding thymes, such as lime or variegated golden lemon thyme. Other border species could include silver mound artemisia (wormwood), which will add silver-grey accents, sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), which offers emerald green herb used flavor May Wine, and honey-scented sweet alyssum, an annual whose profusion of white flowers make it worth replanting each year.



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